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ABSTRACT

A large state agency had been experiencing a variety of changes. The new head of the agency approached communication researchers about doing analyses of the effectiveness of communication in the agency. The researchers conducted two studies: a qualitative one to identify organizational and organizational communication themes, and a quantitative one to describe the relationships among and between factors. This paper is an analysis of the qualitative effort. There were two purposes of the study described here: (1) to describe cultural aspects of an organization experiencing change; and (2) to report what organizational members identified as communication strengths and weaknesses. The qualitative effort assisted the later quantitative study, and the paper will conclude with observations about the benefits of mixed designs. Contains 57 references. (RS)

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ED 428 421

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AND ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

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A large state agency had been experiencing a variety of changes. The new head of the agency approached communication researchers about doing analyses of the effectiveness of communication in the agency. The researchers conducted two studies: a qualitative one to identify organizational and organizational communication themes, and a quantitative one to describe the relationships among and between factors. This paper is an analysis of the qualitative effort.

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ABCD is an organization whose purpose is to regulate long term care facilities for Texas' residents. ABCD accomplishes its mission by conducting surveys, licensing inspections, investigating complaints, and annually reviewing the regulated facilities. Facilities include nursing homes, recovery centers, and assisted living areas.

The Austin portion of ABCD employs approximately 120 individuals whose jobs are classified as management, professional, or clerical. The ten units in the Austin office include Administrative Services Section, Information Services Unit, Complaints Intake and Investigations Section, Licensing Section, Certification Unit, Provider Enrollment Unit, Data/Records Management Unit, ICFMR/RC Department, Program Specialist Unit, and Quality Management and Educational Development. These units work to certify and license facilities, respond to complaints, and report on the various facilities within Texas.

Joe M. was appointed as the new Associate Commissioner at ABCD, and he faced several challenges. First, ABCD is a division of a department of human services (DHS), but until 1993 it was a part of a health department. Second, in November 1997, ABCD moved to a new facility, the Seasons Building, with DHS. Finally, ABCD

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began a re-engineering effort in order to assist integration into DHS. Although the mission of ABCD remained nearly the same, the over 100 employees at the state offices had experienced a change of reporting lines within the government bureaucracy, a physical move to a new building, and a reexamination of the internal structure of the unit and the structure of the jobs within ABCD.

Joe M. recognized that communication was important for managing the changes and maintaining the quality of work during the changes. He consulted Tim B., a research and information management specialist at ABCD, about potential interventions. Joe M. approved two research efforts using students from Southwest Texas State University (SWTSU). First, Fay Barclay conducted a series of interviews in October and November of 1997 and employed other qualitative research methods to describe the culture and to suggest the most critical areas of concern. Second, Leah Bryant, Renee Koval, and Charles McInnis used a survey to specify the magnitude of the problems and to identify points of leverage for making recommendations. Philip Salem, Professor of Speech Communication, was the faculty advisor and helped direct both projects.

This paper is an analysis of the qualitative effort. There were two purposes of the study described here. One purpose was to describe cultural aspects of an organization experiencing change. A second purpose was to report what organizational members identified as communication strengths and weaknesses. The next section explains the theoretical assumptions which we used to frame the qualitative research. The Methods section describes our approach to doing ethnography and the specific methods used to gather data. The Results section will describe cultural themes and communication factors. The qualitative effort assisted the later quantitative study, and the final section includes our observations about the benefits of mixed designs.

THE NATURE OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

What follows is an effort to situate ABCD within some theoretical frameworks. Although we sought to discover cultural themes and communication factors in an inductive manner, we wanted to label the organization in such a way that would allow comparison and contrast to other efforts seeking to describe or analyze organizational change. By doing this, we could also qualify our conclusions and restrain any tendencies we might have had to generalize our results.

There are several assumptions we have about the nature of change (Salem, in press). First, there are different orders of change. Humans are purposeful systems and can choose both behaviors and goals (Ackoff & Emery, 1972). First order change involves evaluating the outcomes of behaviors and adjusting behaviors to maximize goals (Argyris, 1992). Second order change, metanoia, occurs when there is a change of goals and in the ways of making sense of behavior and outcomes (Argyris, 1992; Senge, 1990).

In family systems, second order change is often accomplished through therapy (Fisch, Weakland, & Segal, 1982). In organizations, second order change is part of double feedback learning, learning which challenges the organizational culture

(Argyris, 1992). Learning of this sort consists of activities designed to question tacit assumptions and values. Organizational members, similar to family members, examine the rules that define their role behavior, the deep structure of the system.

Second, the enablers of change may be internal or external. Predictors of organizational change include external characteristics such as environmental competitiveness, complexity, and turbulence, and also internal factors such as personality variables, and the structure and culture of the organization (Huber, Sutcliffe, Miller & Glick, 1995; Slocum & Lei, 1995). The internal factors influence directly the system's behavior and its ability to evaluate outcomes. The organization's behavior, in turn, influences the external factors and the system's perception of those factors.

Third, change is normative. Living systems recognize change as a disruption of equilibrium. The organism seeks outcomes and pursues those outcomes within a range of behaviors and outcomes specified in the organism's genetic code and in the calibrations that are part of its decider mechanism(s) (Miller, 1978). Human higher mental processes include abilities to displace and decenter (Dance & Larson, 1976). Humans can anticipate. Humans can experience change as a violation of perceptual expectations or as inconsistent behavior. In organizations, the perception of a performance gap may lead to innovation, another change (Rogers, & Agarwala-Rogers, 1976).

Nadler (1998) described change as anticipatory or reactive. Anticipatory changes are made early in a disequilibrium cycle before any industry upheaval and in the absence of any imminent environmental threat. Reactive changes come either in response to some strategic initiatives by competitors or in more dire environmental circumstances.

Fourth, change alters the structure of the system. When first order change, simple learning, involves changes in the degree or manner of performing previously performed behaviors, change reinforces existing structures. For example, when routines are refined to improve efficiency, these changes support the existing set of rules that called for those routines. All systems tend toward maximization (Katz & Kahn, 1978). When there is little environmental equivocality or pressure, the system tends to acquire more and more resources, and each cycle of behavior becomes more structured and more efficient at using those resources. The system centralizes as it reduces the equivocality in its processes.

Second order changes generate significantly different adjustments in the structure. For example, the adoption of innovations inside organizations is a process that moves from novelty to routinization (Rogers, & Agarwala-Rogers, 1976; Rogers, 1986). However, the process also means that the system stretches horizontally. Adoption means that the organization has added an additional behavior to its repertoire, and the new behavior poses a challenge to the old methods of control. The continued processing of novel inputs will challenge the rules for processing equivocality (Weick, 1979). The continued acquisition of behaviors into a system's repertoire will push the system to capacity and challenge methods of control. In the

most turbulent environments, there must be fewer processing rules to allow for greater innovation of behavior. Behavior cycles, rather than rules, become the dominant method of reducing uncertainty (Weick, 1979).

Finally, change is multi-level. The natural evolution of systems often involves different levels moving in opposite trajectories. (see Salem, 1997). Organizational members in different ranks or different functional roles often experience change differently (Argyris, 1962). As one level of the system may move toward novelty, the levels immediately above it and below it may be moving toward stability. As one level of the system may be moving toward stability, the levels immediately above and below may be moving toward novelty. In a large organization, what may be a simple refinement of processes for a higher level may appear as a radical departure from the routine for those levels actually implementing the change.

Investigating ABCD provided a unique opportunity to describe an organization experiencing a variety of changes. For ABCD there were two second order changes: the move to a different major administrative unit and the re-engineering project which challenged organizational assumptions. The change of building may constitute either first or second order change. The appointment of Joe M. as Associate Commissioner was part of the natural attrition of such personnel. The move to a different major administrative unit and the change of building originated externally, but the change of Associate Commissioner and the subsequent re-engineering project were internal changes. Both the change in building, the Associate Commissioner, and the re-engineering project were all anticipatory changes, but the change in reporting lines was a reactive one. We might have expected the changes in building and director to reinforce some structures, but the move to a different major administrative unit and the re-engineering project might have altered the entire system. For some, any or all of these changes may have just been more of "the same old thing," but others may have viewed these as radical departures from the past.

What are the cultural features of such an organization? Does a culture sustain itself or does it change as well? How? Are there any communication difficulties common to such organizations? Do particular communication factors become more important?

METHODS

Organizational Ethnography

Ethnography is research aimed at the exploration of the social norms in a group (Rubin, Rubin & Piele, 1996; Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Typically, it entails a thorough description of the group's beliefs, experiences, and social system (Lindlof, 1995). A major goal of ethnography is the comprehension of the shared behavior, artifacts and collective wisdom that members use as they make sense of their experiences (Spradley, 1980).

We assumed the diversity of changes would affect how employees experience their organization and make sense of their work (Barclay, 1997). This suggested three theoretical models that would frame our approach to ethnographic organizational research. First, the most traditional views of organizational culture view culture as the collective learning of shared assumptions by its members. Furthermore, these assumptions illustrate the right way to act and think (Schein, 1992). As such, the foundation for this learning rests in the communication of organizational members. The development of a common language is the springboard for the subsequent acquisition of shared concepts. Thus, the culture of an organization is ultimately communication.

One way of studying language is through metaphor. A metaphor is a figure of speech which provides a means of comparison enabling people to understand something according to the properties of something else (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In this way, a similarity is implied between two often very different objects or concepts (Trice & Beyer, 1993). In addition, metaphors play a crucial role in the sensemaking activities of organization members. Among the noteworthy qualities of metaphors, they make complex notions more accessible, help people to perceive the subtle features of a situation, and generally have more appeal than the dry concepts they represent (Ortony, 1975).

Structuration theory, a second model, suggests that structures constitute the rules and resources of communicative exchanges (Giddens, 1984). These structures are the mechanisms for meaningful interactions, as well as the outcomes of said interactions (Riley, 1983). In essence, structuration is the creation and recreation of culture by means of these rules and resources. As organizational members communicate they create the culture which ultimately sustains and constrains them (Giddens, 1984). In other words, again, communication is culture.

This suggests a focus on norms and on interactions that challenge or reinforce norms. Norms consist of the unwritten rules and values that members create as they work together (Schein, 1992). Very often these norms are established in such a way that organizational members are consciously unaware of their existence. When members can identify others as heroes or villains or when they can relay critical incidents in the organization's history, they reflect organizational norms and values.

Sensemaking, a third model, refers to people's attempts to make sense of their experiences. Furthermore, sensemaking suggests a continual clarification of experience which works backwards (Weick, 1995). People tend to take actions and then make sense of those actions in retrospect. The focus, then, is on the process of interpretation, rather than the interpretation itself (Weick, 1995).

Insight into organizational sensemaking can be obtained by simply asking members to explain past events. In this case, we asked members about the changes occurring over the last four years. Furthermore, when we identified the themes in these explanations and in the other parts of our research, we were gaining an understanding of how the members interpret their organizational world.

The focus of this study was organizational culture and sensemaking. Specifically, the goal was to gain an understanding of the organizational culture at ABCD through an examination of the communication patterns and processes of employees as they made sense of their experiences on the job, with each other, and in relation to numerous changes.

Gathering Data

We used several methods to gather data. The first method was participant observation. The significance of participant observation is that it permits researchers to view the organization from the inside and interact with the scene they are observing (Rubin, et al., 1996). The researcher's role in our research can best be described as observer-as-participant (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Lindlof, 1995). That is, although members of the organization recognized us as "outsiders," they also knew that we would be helping them with our report. In fact, one of us has been pursed as a full time employee after the study. We observed meetings and interactions, and we took note of the surroundings.

The second major data gathering device was informant interviews. In informant interviews, the roles of the participants are distinct. That is, the interviewer conducts the interview as a non-member of the culture while the interviewees recognize themselves as members of a culture and a source of information about that culture. Characteristics of the informant interview include an impromptu exchange and the establishment of a solid rapport with the interviewee (Lindlof, 1995).

After several meetings with Tim B. and Joe M., we decided to use stratified sampling to generate the sample of employees to be interviewed. We designated three subgroups within ABCD: Management (Associate Commissioner, Section Managers, Unit Managers, Unit Supervisors and Group Leaders), Professional Staff (Program Specialists, Nurses, Administrative Technicians III and IV, and engineers) and Clerical Staff (Administrative Support, Technicians I and II, Secretaries, and File Clerks). Once these subgroups were specified, Barclay used probability proportionate to size sampling in order to collect participants from each. Probability proportionate to size sampling is an effort to ensue that the size of samples selected from each subset reflects its size in the population (Smith, 1988). This type of representative sampling is one approach for obtaining samples in qualitative research (Lindlof, 1995).

We began with a loosely structured interview guide based on the cultural questions format developed by Barnett and Goldhaber and some items from the ICA Organizational Communication Audit Interview Guide (Goldhaber, 1993). Our initial interview guide contained questions designed to elicit metaphors, stories and explanations. Barclay modified the questions as the interviews proceeded, she dropped some questions, and added follow-up reminders to others. However, the cultural foci remained the same as in the original.

Barclay conducted twenty informant interviews, which lasted approximately two hours each. Employees were contacted and the interviews were scheduled at times which were most convenient for the employees. Barclay's approach encouraged employees to discuss their experiences at ABCD and generally allowed for more conversational interviews.

At the beginning of each interview employees were informed that their names would be included on a list of participants, but that their individual responses would not be directly attributed to them. The researcher informed the participants that the interviews were being tape-recorded. However, they were told that they had the option to not be recorded or stop the recording at any time during the process if they felt uncomfortable. Furthermore, Barclay explained that the purpose of recording was to help with the research process and that no one else would hear the interviews. In an effort to preserve the anonymity of participants, Barclay identified interviewees with a number, such as "P-52" in the body of her report (Barclay, 1997). Likewise, when participants' responses included the name of an actual employee, it was replaced with a fictitious name.

In addition to these scheduled interviews, there were several unscheduled ones. That is, organizational members would "drop in" to our temporary office and volunteer information. We made no attempt to conduct a full interview, but took note of data provided in this way.

We collected and analyzed texts. We obtained formal documents used by the organization to represent itself and any other documents mentioned in our other data gathering. Our analysis consisted of a review of these documents to confirm data gathered in other ways.

Finally, we conducted a focus group in an effort to obtain some sense of validity through free consensus. As a tool for qualitative research, the focus group has tremendous capability to generate a wealth of useful data. Normally, focus groups involve five to ten participants in a moderated group discussion covering relevant topics (Greenbaum, 1988; Morgan, 1988). A unique property of the focus group is its process view of the interactions among participants (Byers & Wilcox, 1991). A focus group was held with a representative sample of employees from the various sections and units of ABCD. The purpose of this encounter was to test the findings from the informant interviews and probe for more details which might emerge in a group setting.

We employed a modified cyclical design in our research. In a cyclical design the qualitative researcher alternately consults the data and the literature (Lindlof, 1995). However, Barclay used a more linear design involving gathering and interpreting data first followed by connecting the themes to the literature. As Barclay conducted interviews, she had weekly meetings with Salem who gathered literature he thought might have been suggested by the data. Then, after completing and interpreting the interviews, Barclay and Salem began the process of selecting from the literature.

RESULTS

Cultural Themes

Stepchild of DHS

A major theme in the culture of ABCD was the idea that ABCD was the stepchild of DHS. Specifically, the metaphor indicated that many employees generally felt that they didn't really "fit in" with DHS. One employee wished

> DHS had started paying more attention sooner. I now understand why a lot of people here have a negative feeling about management at DHS, because we're treated like the redheaded stepchild. (P-27)

Another employee expressed a similar concern about the relationship between ABCD and DHS.

> Nobody really wants ABCD. The Department of Health does not want ABCD. DHS does not want ABCD. ABCD . . . has always been an ugly duckling. (P-16)

In other words, much like the typical "stepchild," the employees of ABCD felt a bit misunderstood and had not yet found a proper home at DHS. Moreover, they tended to feel that DHS had not made much of an effort to bring them into the family. In the words of one employee:

> In the past it's not been a very good or dynamic working relationship. They've sort of left us up to our own devices, I would say, and not really worked to bring this organization into the agency. (P-17)

After being ignored by DHS for so long, the few overtures they have made have been perceived as largely superficial. One employee noted this absence of sincerity.

> They gave us a little welcome to the neighborhood book and their policy on leave and whatever, but as far as us getting to know DHS or them getting to know us, you know, well Mr. Coltrane even admitted that that never occurred. So, I kind of do feel like a stepchild. (P-26)

This sense of feeling out of place or not belonging was further complicated by a functional division between the two entities. This was perhaps best captured in a statement by an employee who noted that the functions of ABCD and DHS are really incongruous.

> I've got this feeling we don't even belong and I think a lot of other people believe it too . . . We came over from the Health department to a service agency. We're not a service. We don't provide a service. We're the regulators. (P-23)

Employees seemed to feel that this essential part of the ABCD identity had not been validated or appreciated by DHS. In fact, there was some concern that DHS did not fully grasp the scope of the ABCD program. One employee said "I don't think that the agency really understands what we do or how intricate our program is or how much work we generate. I really don't think they understand that."(P-17)

In addition to the problems related to identity and inclusion, the employees of ABCD felt as though DHS had waited too long to develop the relationship. After

four years on their own, the sudden attention seemed to be "too little, too late." (P-4) Another employee echoed this sentiment.

> It's like it's a day late and a dollar short. If they had done this or even displayed half this much interest two years ago it might have had a better reception from some staff. (P-7)

However, after waiting for so long, the recent attempts to integrate ABCD into DHS were perceived as intrusive. Employees felt that DHS had imposed its will on ABCD.

> It's just there again, have they asked us what we want . . . have they come to us and said how can we serve you better? What can we do to help you? Well I haven't had anybody come to me and I'm a manager. Have they come to clerical staff . . . I think not. (P-17)

Furthermore, there was speculation that the motives of DHS were not that grand. Many employees felt that the sudden interest was sparked by their need for ABCD and not by a genuine interest to integrate the two. The move to the Seasons Building and the re-engineering project were viewed with some negativity. One employee noted

> There's some resentment about now that long term care is a hot topic in the legislature . . . oh now they notice us, now we're important. Now they're saying "Oh, we need to have you more involved with us. In fact, we want you over here." (P-3)

Another employee agreed with this assessment and further added

> As I see it, they're scared of losing our other programs due to welfare reform so now they have to make us a part of them so that it will be more difficult for the legislature to move us to a different agency. (P-30)

Thus, the stepchild metaphor was an indication of a perceived lack of cohesion between ABCD and DHS. And despite the frustration of being ignored for so long, the employees were not overjoyed at the recent attempts to bring ABCD into the fold of DHS. Drawing on the stepchild metaphor, these reactions to the move suggest that ABCD as a whole wanted to be part of the DHS family. However, employees of ABCD still harbored a fair amount of resentment over the unwanted attention, as well as doubt over the sincerity of the effort.

Compartmentalization

Another feature of the organizational culture was the perception of ABCD as highly compartmentalized, such that each section constituted a subculture within the broader culture of ABCD. Despite the presence of shared assumptions, an organization may spawn distinct subcultures after it reaches a certain size (Schein, 1992). Commonalties in experiences, sense of identity, and communication within units shape the more general organizational belief system into distinct subcultures, such that identification with the unit comes at the expense of working with other units (Mintzberg, 1979). ABCD employees tended to identify more closely with their own sections than with other sections. On that note, two employees observed that

> You just have your different sections and you have your different bosses in each section . . . you have your chiefs and all your Indians in different sections and tribes don't cross paths. (P-20)
>
> I think there's a lot of territorial attitude. You know, this is what we do and we're this section and we're only this section and it doesn't matter what you do. (P-11)

Another employee expressed a similar concern.

> I get the feeling that everybody's kind of isolated in their own section. . . I don't mean to give the impression that everybody's just walled off, because people are friendly with each other in different sections and they have lunch together or you know they visit together, but as far as work-related interaction, I feel like the sections have become more and more compartmentalized.(P-24)

This alludes to the functional divisions in ABCD and suggests that employees had a growing sense of detachment from other sections. Many did not fully understand what went on in other sections and how that affected them. According to one employee

> I don't know what that is, but it's disconnected. And I think that everybody else would probably feel the same way. They don't have any idea what all the souls do over there, and what Provider Enrollment is responsible for, or Certification, or exactly what Information does, or Licensure.(P-23)

Another employee offered a similar example about the impact of compartmentalization.

> A lot of times I'll give somebody the 1-800 Medicaid line and they go, "Oh, well, they referred me to you." So, it's like we don't know what each other does. So, how can we help the public. (P-26)

In other words, many employees at ABCD did not grasp the big picture. They had lost the thread of understanding which binds them together in their mission.

One aspect of culture which encourages subcultures is the actual physical setting of the organization. The employees at ABCD were located on the first and third floors of the Creeky Building. Several of the sections had their own suite of offices that did not immediately connect with other sections, while one other section was physically isolated from the others. According to two employees, this had considerable impact on the frequency of interaction.

> Here with the closed set of suites, and being compartmentalized as we are, some of us never see anyone else again if we don't make an effort to get out and talk to others, hear other things. (P-22).
>
> The perception is that there's not a lot of communication between sections. Partly it's geographical, physical, the way we're laid out. You just don't run into them, so you don't talk to them. (P-21).

In addition to the impact of functional divisions, the physical separation also contributed to the development of subcultures. In particular, the isolation of some sections discouraged communication with other sections. The result of this compartmentalization in ABCD contributed to the feelings of alienation from DHS. Moreover, the flourishing subcultures added to the growing climate of political unrest.

Politics

Another norm of the organizational culture at ABCD was politics. Political activity emerges in situations that are high in uncertainty and characterized by a struggle between organizational members over competing interests (Frost, 1987). The culture of ABCD reflected a great deal of uncertainty in the wake of changes due to the move and the re-engineering project. Likewise, political activity frequently accompanies such innovations (Kotter, 1985). For example, one employee said that the selection of the re-engineering team was political.

> I know why some people were on it. They wanted to get rid of them, get them out of the mainstream, park them over there for nine months. (P-30)

Another example of political activity was the petition. It was an anonymous response to the actions of a former associate commissioner who was noted for having made unpopular decisions about personnel and for shutting down communication in the organization. According to one employee

> These people were making decisions without getting information and they did not know what they were doing sometimes. It was like if they let any light come into that the whole thing would evaporate. (P-12)

So in the wake of such actions, someone drafted an anonymous open letter/petition to the commissioner which encouraged the employees of ABCD to

> Lend your strength to this grass-roots movement. Many of us cannot afford to take risks, but if a whole group of people let the commissioner know what is going on, we will have a chance to make things right . . .. we have had enough of these Gestapo tactics. (From the letter)

While there was still speculation about who wrote the letter, one employee seemed to think that more than one person was behind it because of the thoroughness and detail.

> It was so comprehensive that this one person couldn't know all these things. So I think it involved two or three people (P-30)

Several employees mentioned a "whistleblower" in the organization, who reported the problems of ABCD to the legislature. This instance of principled dissent is an example of political activity undertaken to achieve a goal in opposition to resistance from others (Frost, 1987). They also noted that as a result of having blown the whistle on ABCD, this person "can't be touched." However, one employee suggested that they got around this by assigning the whistleblower to the re-engineering project.

A major source of contention in ABCD, which is the result of political activity, concerned the program specialists. Many employees had the perception that they did nothing.

> We've got people over on this side who have a lot of work to do, who are always busy, who resent the people on that side who sit there and make a lot more money than they do and who don't do anything. (P-6)

Despite this prevailing view, another employee explained that their situation resulted from miscommunication between the program specialists and regional directors. According to this employee

> The regional directors thought that the program specialists were bending over backwards for the industry, but they were essentially doing what they were told to by top management. And top management never had the guts to tell the regional directors that they were doing this. And so those people got blamed for other things that occurred. (P-19)

In other words, the program specialists were penalized for doing their jobs. In addition, some of their duties were taken from them. This example, as well as previous examples, points to a history of organizational politics which has undoubtedly had an impact of the present state of ABCD. In essence, the past activities and experiences of employees serve to frame the present atmosphere. The implications of this are apparent in the remarks of employees noted here in this paper.

Information is Power

Employees of ABCD tended to feel that having information gives them a measure of power. Power evolves through a sociohistorical process, wherein past struggles inform the rules of the organization and how members experience reality. These rules enable and constrain the activities of organizational members (Clegg, 1981; Ranson, Hinings, Greenwood, 1980). The culture of ABCD had a history of power games over information. One employee noted that in the recent past

> There was protection of knowledge. . . knowledge was power and they weren't really educating or training staff. You knew what they wanted you to know. They were protecting themselves and their positions and trying to get ahead at others' expense. (P-16)

Another employee also agreed with the idea that information is power and suggested that this norm still exists.

> One of the pervasive tenets of this culture is that knowledge is power, and I'm not going to let you get but just a little bit of it. You never get that consciously, but there's nowhere to go hardly as far as promotions, there are no raises really to speak of, so the only payoff is the perception of power (P-21).

Power can also be a function of relationships. Relationship power can be acquired through the generation of uncertainty (Frost, 1987). Several employees of ABCD suggested that this occurs periodically. One employee further explained

> They want to keep us in the dark so they don't let us know too much. They try to keep us confused because that makes them important. (P-6)

Another employee agreed with this appraisal and added

> There are a few people who don't tell you things because that little bit of knowledge is their power, but sooner or later somebody will tell it. Somebody will Xerox a sheet of paper and leave it in the copy machine, and somebody will say something to somebody else. (P-4)

In response to such an atmosphere, one employee recalled a time in the past when things were not like they are now. According to this employee

> I do not buy into knowledge is power. My thinking is that our supervisors, our leaders cannot look any better than we make them look and so therefore I liked it much better when we had an agency that was very open and information was given out and everybody kind of knew what was going on even with speculation . . . we had staff meetings where people were kept informed...we haven't had that for a long time. (P-24)

These examples indicate a sense of disillusionment among employees. In fact, one gets the sense that the state of affairs during our interviews was unsatisfactory by most standards. The idea that some people prize individual power over and above the welfare of the organization was troubling.

Favoritism

The perception of favoritism was another norm in ABCD. Many employees believed that preferred status was conferred on some, but not on others. One employee noted

> Everybody has a favorite. If you ask the staff, every manager has people who are favorites, and for whom they do more, or they have people for whom they do less. Oh yes, I think you'll hear it from everybody. (P-1)

A common example of favoritism occurred with promotions. In the words of one employee. "promotions depend on who you know, not what you do." (P-8) Likewise, someone else noted that "promotions are not there for the people who are not in the club." (P-29) According to one employee, this was sometimes fairly obvious. On one occasion, there was an opening for which several people in the section would have been qualified. However, the employee said

> There was one person in particular, who you could just tell by watching what was going on that they were being groomed for that position, and they got it. (P-5)

Another employee in a different section observed a similar phenomenon.

> You hear about job openings being posted, but then find out that the person they hired was already in mind for the job. (P-15)

One employee went so far as to suggest the presence of a "DHS Mafia that would protect you ." (P-28) In addition to these examples, an employee shared a story about someone who was promoted and the position was not even posted. According to this person, "you have to post open jobs, so they got a fix somewhere in there." (P-14)

Each of these examples suggests that advancement in a political culture depends greatly on a willingness to play the game. One employee summed it up nicely with the following observation:

> I feel that favorites are played real heavily and I don't feel it's exclusive to our area. I've seen a little bit here and there. There's like a game. If you know how to play the game, you're gone. You know, you can climb that little ladder and keep going. (P-18)

As for the effects of favoritism on others, the same employee expressed frustration about it.

> It makes it uncomfortable to work there because it irritates me and it makes me not want to be around. It's like why even bother. I can do the best I can do and be, you know, perfect with all of it and it's still not going to make a difference. (P-5)

The examples of favoritism in ABCD reflect its political culture. They seem to suggest a breach of trust between management and employees. Furthermore, it is clear that the result of the accumulation of these kinds of experiences shapes the perceptions of employees. Likewise, the stories circulating about favoritism serve to reinforce these perceptions and frame their sensemaking activities.

Humor

Humor was another norm of the culture at ABCD. Humor is a form of communication that promotes laughter resulting from discordant meanings or relationships (Duncan, 1982). It reflects the culture of an organization, as well as its norms and values due to its connection with meanings (Trice & Beyer, 1993). Within ABCD, the employees relied on humor to combat the frustrations they experience on the job. A manager noted that

> There is a lot of laughing and talking among the staff doing their assignments, very few work conversations don't deteriorate or escalate into a little bit of a personal touch. (P-1)

This seemed to be typical of most sections. In fact, most employees had cartoons posted in their offices and cubicles and they tended to agree that humor was indispensable.

Some of the humor at ABCD was a response to changes, such as the move to the Seasons Building and the re-engineering project. In the face of such dramatic changes, it was important for them to vent their feelings of exasperation and fear without disrupting the work environment. Humor provides a means of doing just that, while also bringing them closer together (Malone, 1980). One employee shared a story about using humor to express dissatisfaction with the move. Apparently, that section was not given enough cubicles to accommodate all of its employees. As a result, they tried to put two people in a cubicle. but a support beam made it impossible to fit them both in. The employee noted that as a commentary on that situation

> One day Thelonious Monk came in and he was wearing a shoehorn around his neck. The shoehorn was to kind of indicate that they're trying to fit us all into this tight space. (P-10)

This attempt to poke fun at a difficult situation helps employees manage the situation more effectively.

The same employee offered another example of using humor about re-engineering. The manager of that section serves on the re-engineering team and is rarely in the office. As it happens, the manager is also an avid birdwatcher. The employee recalled that since birdwatchers keep logs of their bird sightings

> We started this thing of we're going to keep a log of Charlie Parker sightings, whenever anybody saw him, jot it down. . . Oh my god it's a Charlie Parker sighting. People go up to the door and put the date and write down what they saw. Since he's so rarely in the office these days, it was our way of saying we miss you. (P-10)

Another employee used humor to make fun of the bureaucracy of ABCD. This employee created an unofficial Employee Handbook that pokes fun at the rules and capitalizes on the tension created by the accountability of ABCD to the residents, facilities, legislature and the public. In a similar vein, an employee created the "Bullshit Ribbon" based on the comedy of George Carlin for the people in that section.

> I don't remember which one of his specials it was, but he was talking about ribbons, all the different colored ribbons there are out there for AIDS, breast cancer, this and that. And he said, we just need to have one kind of ribbon . . . a brown ribbon for all the bullshit. And I just thought that was so inspired, so I went out and made some brown ribbons. And to this day I wear it whenever the times get to me as my silent protest. (P-27)

Everyone seemed to agree that humor was an essential component of their culture at ABCD. While the kind of humor and frequency of expression may have varied by section, the consensus was that every section relied on it to cope with stress. According to one employee

> You have to interject some humor into the workplace to keep you from being so down, and to put more of a balance into things. You know, you're looking at all this bad stuff all day long, it could kind of tend to bring you down or make you depressed. (P-10)

The focus of humor can also be other people who are higher up in the organization. One employee explained that someone who is no longer with ABCD used to say "mute point" instead of "moot point". As a result, whenever someone else makes that mistake, the employee says "Oh, it's a mute point, so you really didn't say it." (P-14) The same employee also suggested that memos with grammatical errors can be a source of great humor.

> If a big shot gets a secretary to type his memo and send it out, God forbid if there's a grammatical error. That person's reputation is shot with us. It's "Well why don't we get X to write the memo . . . ha ha ha," and that kind of thing. It gives us joy to put down other people. (P-14)

Thus, humor was a necessary component of the culture of ABCD. It would seem that in the wake of political intrigue and organizational upheaval, employees resorted to humor for survival. This outlet was a positive indication of the long-term viability of ABCD and of the strength of the spirit of its employees.

Summary

The findings of this investigation suggest six norms which characterize the organizational culture at ABCD. These include stepchild of DHS, compartmentalization, politics, information is power, favoritism, and humor. Considered together, these norms reflect the history of ABCD. They attest to the power of the past in determining employees' understanding of the present.

Communication Factors

There were two groups of organizational communication factors. Problem factors consisted of organizational or organizational communication outcomes most frequently noted by the participants in the qualitative study. In effect, the "problems" were the most common complaints. The communication influences themes were less frequently mentioned as complaints or were more often used to explain the problems.

Problem Areas

ABCD personnel identified two problem areas. Information adequacy is the extent to which organizational members receive needed information (Goldhaber, 1993). There are three types of information: task, human, and maintenance information (Goldhaber, 1993). Task or job related information refers to the information needed to meet day to day responsibilities. At ABCD task information includes information about job goals, how to actually perform a job, and the quality and quantity of work expected. Human or personal information refers to the information needed to meet individual needs. At ABCD this type of information includes information about the chances for bonuses or promotion, about personal benefits, and about evaluations of an individual's work. Maintenance or organizational information refers to the information needed to sustain the functioning of a unit or the entire organization. At ABCD maintenance information includes information about the success or failures of ABCD or a particular unit, the status of the re-engineering project, lines of responsibility, and information about how organizational decisions are made that might affect a person's job.

The variety of changes at ABCD had generated both organizational and personal uncertainty. A lack of information was the most frequently mentioned "communication weakness." There was confusion and suspicion about all three major changes. Individuals were especially worried about the new role of the agency, often using a "step-child" metaphor to identify ABCD. One employee commented, "I now understand why a lot of people here have negative feelings about management at DHS, because we (ABCD) are treated like the red-headed stepchild." They were also worried about the status of their positions as part of the re-engineering efforts. One employee said that the selection of the re-engineering team was political. "I know why some people were on it. They wanted to get rid of them, get them out of the mainstream, park them over there for nine months." All of this suggested a need for more human and maintenance information.

A second important factor is climate. Organizational climate refers to the set of perceptions individuals have about the social and psychological aspects of an organization (Falcione et al., 1987). It includes perceptions of autonomy, trust, warmth, fairness, formality, and relational satisfaction (Taguiri & Litwin, 1968). Supervisor climate refers to similar perceptions about the relationships between workers and their specific supervisors or managers, and coworker climate refers to

the perceptions of the relationships between organizational members not in a reporting line (Falcione et al., 1987).

Of special interest to ABCD are the perceptions individuals have about the fairness and formality of the ways decisions are made about hirings and firings, work assignments, promotions, and bonuses. Influencing such decisions is part of an organization's politics (Frost, 1987), and we referred to perceptions of these activities as the political climate in the quantitative study.

Climate is the product of how organizational members enact their culture (Schnieder, 1990). We did identify humor as an element of the culture at ABCD and humor would suggest a supportive climate. But, we also identified compartmentalization as a norm. ABCD employees tended to identify more closely with their own sections than with other sections. On that note, two employees observed, "You just have your different sections and you have your different bosses in each section . . . you have your chiefs and all your Indians in different sections and tribes don't cross paths." There was the feeling that information is power, and along with a sensitivity to internal politics, these norms suggest a defensive climate. Organizational members expressed resentment and dissatisfaction. In one case, a petition expressing some of these concerns was circulated.

Communication Influences

A potential influence on both information adequacy and the climate of ABCD is the effectiveness of the communication channels. Channels of communication are the various ways in which information can be communicated (Miller, 1995). There are many different channels of communication at ABCD. They include written communication such as memos, p-mail (the ABCD term for their e-mail) meetings, telephone, and informal face-to-face communication - the grapevine.

ABCD personnel identified p-mail and written documents as effective channels, but they also complained about meetings and teams. The strength of written communication as opposed to meetings was expressed by one employee in the following way. "Seeing it in writing helps because it makes thing clear. That way there's less room for mistakes like when you just hear things and it's 'Oh I heard this, but Miles Davis down the hall heard something else.'"

Skill at using some channels may be related to the individual's general interpersonal communication competence. Communication competence involves a demonstration of skills, and there are three types of skills most people would identify with a competent communicator (Spitzberg & Cupbach, 1984). Openness involves speaking in a clear and understandable manner, freely expressing feelings, and being candid and frank. Responsiveness includes asking appropriate questions, encouraging others to speak, being open to the ideas of others, and being a good listener. Adaptability or flexibility encompasses dealing with unexpected situations well, coordinating communication with others, and managing disagreements or conflicts well. In an organization, communication competence includes working with others, realizing goals, adapting to situations, and being aware of the needs of

others (Monge et al., 1982). When individuals are more open, responsive, or adaptive, information is communicated more effectively and task performance improves (Daniels & Spiker, 1983; Jablin, 1979; Richmond & McCrosky, 1992), and climate improves (Downs, 1992; Gibb, 1960; Kay & Christophel, 1995).

ABCD personnel identified several areas of concern related to communicative competence. There were indications of secrecy, a lack of openness. One person reported, "They (management) want to keep us in the dark so they don't let us know too much." Another noted, "It's kind of like things happen and they forget to tell us." Some employees also complained that their supervisor didn't "check into things," and was not responsive to questions. The most common communication skill complaints dealt with adaptability and conflict management. The compartmentalization norms in the agency seemed to make it difficult to coordinate communication and avoidance seemed to be the norm for managing conflict. One employee noted, "They (other employees and managers) snub each other and they get together in their offices, and as the Brits say, they natter, natter, natter, natter, natter about it."

Summary

Summarily, ABCD personnel reported problems with information adequacy and climate, and they reported dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of some channels of communication and most aspects of communication competence. However, a qualitative report cannot clearly identify the links between these potential communication influences and information adequacy and climate. It is possible, for example, that the p-mail system at ABCD is indeed connected to information adequacy, but it may not influence climate. Additionally, the communication factors may be unrelated to the adequacy and climate; there may be other factors that are more important than communication. These qualitative results led to the construction and administration of a survey, and the results of the quantitative analysis are reported elsewhere (Salem, Barclay, Koval, & Bryant, 1999).

DISCUSSION

The host organization, ABCD, was experiencing change of a complex nature. Some of the changes were first order changes, but others were of a second order. Some change originated externally while others began internally. ABCD may have been able to anticipate some changes, but it could only react to others. Some changes tended to reinforce the existing organizational structure, but other changes challenged the structure. Organizational members at different levels and in different units may have experienced the changes in different ways. In less than four years ABCD had changed directors and had moved to a new administrative unit and to a new building. They were in the midst of an internal review of practices and processes. Our purposes were to describe the culture of such an organization and to identify organizational problems and communication factors associated with those problems.

A guiding, unifying, and dominant metaphor for ABCD was that of a step-child. The metaphor allows members to see the organization and its members as "us" and the other organizations involved in the changes as "them." The metaphor was rooted in the recent history of the organization, and it is now part of the interpretive frames of members. The metaphor allows members to make sense of the turbulence around them. This particular metaphor appears to be unique to this organization and its history. However, identifying this metaphor leads to several questions. Are some metaphors more likely at times of complex change? How do "in-group - out-group" metaphors come to dominate members' language?

The perceptions of compartmentalization, organizational politics, and favoritism suggest accelerated loose coupling, even de-coupling. ABCD is an information processing system, and so, it is similar to other governmental organizations, educational institutions and hospitals that structure themselves in loose ways. At a time of complex changes, ABCD became less coupled, and the structure of the entire system appeared to fragment as units disassociated. Joe M.'s major tasks were to coordinate and integrate units and reestablish a supportive climate. What this suggests is that second order changes, those that challenge existing structures, dominated at a time when there were changes of both orders. Would this be true in similar circumstances?

ABCD is an information processing organization, and is should come as no surprise that information would be powerful in such an organization. However, ABCD members also identified information adequacy as a major concern. In fact, their biggest concern was the lack of needed information about organizational and structural changes. It may be that some are too busy "fixing" things to communicate them to others, or it may be an extension of the decoupling in which members horde organizational resources. What other explanations account for this type of adequacy problem, and what circumstances make some explanations more likely than others? How do these explanations and their prominence relate to the complexity of change?

Humor was a way that ABCD members coped with their circumstances. The use of humor may be a natural response to the tension of the moment, a sort of gallows humor, or a response to being under constant pressure such as in a MASH unit. However, is this a feature of large organizations, of government organizations, or of organizations undergoing complex change?

Our ethnography was part of a larger project which also featured quantitative methods. Others have employed mixed methods for five purposes (Cresswell, 1994; Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989): (a) triangulation, seeking convergence of results, (b) complementarity, revealing different facets of phenomena, (c) developmentally, using one method to inform another, (d) initiation, reveling contradictions or perspectives unavailable to a single method, and (e) expansion, where mixed methods add scope and breadth to a study. Our research began as an effort at triangulation, and the methods were employed developmentally with the qualitative research preceding the quantitative one. The qualitative methods identified themes that later became variables in the quantitative study. However, as

often happens, the two methods were complementary, reveling different aspects of phenomena, and the mixed methods added breadth. The quantitative results actually expanded the qualitative ones. This was because the qualitative research was able to link themes to constructs with elaborate subsets of constructs and variables. What is more, there were some contradictions. The subjects in the qualitative study complained about conflict avoidance, but the quantitative results suggested that avoidance may be an effective means of managing conflict (Salem, Barclay, Koval, Bryant, 1999). Our experiences with mixed methods were good ones, and we believe more of these efforts should be attempted.

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